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ABSTRACT

This discussion of the speech act of thanking looks at the basic functions of the act and responses to it in American English. It is argued that in general, "thank you" expressions are used to express appreciation of benefits and to enhance rapport between interlocutors, and that this basic use is extended to the functions of conversational opening, changing, stopping, closing, leave-taking, and offering positive reinforcement. A further use is to express dissatisfaction or discomfort indirectly, often using sarcasm and often with differential intonation. Six types of response to the use of "thank you" are identified (acceptance, denial, reciprocity, comment, nonverbal gesture, no response), the choice of which is determined by factors such as relationship of the interlocutors and communicative intent. Examples of each are offered. Contains 13 references. (MSE)

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Speech Acts of *Thank You* and Responses to it in American English[1]

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This paper presents the functions of thanking and responses to it in American English. It argues that *thank you* expressions are basically used to express appreciation of benefits and that this basic use of appreciating benefits is extended to the functions of conversational opening, stopping, closing and to the functions of leave-takings and positive answers, but not to the function of emotional dissatisfaction or discomfort. This paper also discusses various response patterns such as *acceptance, denial, reciprocity, comments, non-verbal gestures*, etc.

BACKGROUND

Many studies have been done to examine the ways in which compliments are used and responded to (Pomerantz 1978; Wolfson and Manes 1980; Holmes 1986). Little attention, however, has been paid to how thank you expressions are used and responded to. Coulmas (1981) contrasts thanks and apologies using some European languages and Japanese. Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) compare expressions of gratitude by native and non-native speakers of English to evaluate English-learners' abilities to express gratitude in the second language. They concentrate on the comparisons, but fail to develop the various uses and functions of thanking expressions in American English. Furthermore, neither gives a detailed description of responses to thank you.

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This paper presents an analysis of the speech act of thanking and responses to it in American English. Hymes (1972) notes that the level of speech acts mediates immediately between the usual levels of grammar and the rest of a speech event or situation in that it implicates both linguistic form and social norms. This implies that the way communicative conversation works should be considered in relation to social factors. Accordingly, in my study I considered such social factors as the relationship of the speaker and addressee, social status, etc. in a variety of situations and contexts.

In collecting data, I basically adopted the ethnographic approach of Hymes because it is important to observe the actual and spontaneous use in everyday interactions. But data from written texts and T.V. programs was also used to supplement the example of actual use. There are 364 examples of responses to an act of thanking in my corpus. Since I focused on American English, I excluded examples from non-naive speakers of American English.

In explaining types of illocutionary acts, Searle (1969:67) gives a good rule for thanking:

Propositional content	Past act A done by H (hearer)
Preparatory	A benefits S (speaker) and S believes A benefits S.
Sincerity	S feels grateful or appreciative for A
Essential	Counts as an expression of gratitude or appreciation.

Table 1. Structure of thanks interaction.

Though his rule is very systematic, he does not include the response formula. Thank you expressions should be considered along

with the responses to them, since they are "chained actions" or units of discourse, coordinated with each other. The response formula is well defined by Brown and Levinson (1987). In formularizing politeness, they classify two types of politeness: positive politeness, which is used to satisfy the speakers' needs for approval and belonging, and negative politeness, which functions to minimize the imposition of a face-threatening act. According to Brown and Levinson, expressing thanks and its responses belong to the category of offending speaker's negative faces. They consider the responses to thanks as minimizing the debt (1987:67). As Lakoff points out (1973:298), this politeness strategy of thanking, like other polite formulas, is also "reaffirming and strengthening relationships." In what follows, I will analyze these interactions in two parts: thank you expressions and the responses to them.

THE FUNCTIONS OF THANKING

The person offering the gratitude has to have a valid reason for thanking in the preceding context. Thank you expressions may often be required by social convention.[1] The way gratitude is verbally expressed varies, ranging from simple, "*thank you*", or "*thanks*", to the more extensive, "*I appreciate X*", "*I am thankful for X*", "*I am grateful for X*", "*Please accept my thanks for X*", etc. The choice of a gratitude expression is largely dependent on how the thanker evaluates what the benefactor did for him/her and how the expressions function. While the major and general effect of

thanking is, like the speech act of complimenting, to enhance rapport or solidarity between interlocutors by making the other party feel good, there are some more specific functions which thanking serves. In this section, I will classify them in order to examine how thanking is used.

1. Function of appreciating benefit: Appreciating benefit is the basic function of thank you expressions. There are several divisions in this category. The most fundamental division is whether the benefit is physical or mental. Physical benefits include gifts and help or service. Consider the following examples[2]:

(1) Context: *Kevin gave a doll to his girlfriend to celebrate her birthday.*
Girlfriend: Oh, thank you very much, Kevin. It's so cute.
Kevin: You like it?
Girlfriend: (Smiling) Yeah, I love it.

(2) Context: *Helping a roommate who has a problem with his T.V.*
Steve: Something is wrong with my T.V. Could you help me?
Tom: Let's see. (After spending a long time, he fixes it)
Steve: Thank you very much, Tom. You're an expert.

In both examples above, the benefactor's action benefitted the beneficiary, and the beneficiary strongly believes that the benefactor's action benefitted him/her. This is demonstrated from the use of adverbs such as "very", "so", "a lot". These adverbs show a high intensity of gratitude, making the gratitude more emphatic and effective. The strong sense of gratitude may also be shown in the use of names (Kevin, Tom) following the thank you expressions, which increases the degree of familiarity expressed

between the interlocutors. More importantly, these thank you expressions are followed by a brief comment: e.g. "It's so cute". "You're an expert." Additional comments of this kind serve to add sincerity to the thank you expressions. In this sense, thank you expressions in the case of (1) and (2) may manifest sincerity, although they are usually considered as conventional, ritual, or mechanical.

The benefit can be "potential" or "actual" in Coulmas' terms (1981). Potential benefits include a promise, offer, or invitation not yet done, while actual benefits include a favor or invitation done. This division depends on whether the benefit is already done or will be. Examples (1) and (2) above are cases of actual benefit. Consider an example of potential benefit:

(3) Context: *A man promises that he will give a ride to his friend.*
John: Excuse me, Chuck. Could you give me a ride to Marsh?
Chuck: What time?
John: Around 4 o'clock.
Chuck: O.K., come to my room at 4:00.
John: Thanks a lot.
Chuck: You're welcome.

In (3), the action of giving a ride is not done yet. Furthermore, the participants do not know whether or not the promise may fail to be achieved for some reason. Yet the promise itself is appreciated. This is probably because the asker focuses on the process of the speech act rather than its result, and because he expects the action to be done. As Searle (1969) mentions, the promise itself may be at least "intended" to benefit him/her.

Thank you expressions can differ according to whether some

action is voluntarily done by the benefactor or requested by the beneficiary. Most of my data concern actions requested by the beneficiary.

The benefit can be direct or indirect. In most of my data, the action directly benefits the thanker. Let's consider an example of indirect benefit:

(4) Context: *It is raining. John is about to go out without an umbrella. His roommate, Tom, says.*
Tom: It's raining, John.
John: Oh, thanks.

What Tom said is informative: I inform you that it's raining. In order that the "thanks" expression is to be elicited from John, it is prerequisite that Tom know that John is planning going out. Otherwise, John may respond, "Oh, really! I didn't know that." Thus in (4), the thankable is the information from the preceding communicative act itself. As Searle points out (1969:70), both because there are several different dimensions of illocutionary force, and because the same utterance act may be performed with a variety of different intentions, it is important to realize that one and the same utterance may constitute the performance of several different illocutionary acts.

2. Function of conversational opening, changing, stopping, closing: In a conversational opening, there can be potentially high tension between the interlocutors. Thank you expressions used in this situation may reduce the tension somewhat. The use of thanks in the conversational opening is shown in the situation where high degree

of formality is required : formal addresses, special lectures, conferences, T.V. talk shows, etc.

Thank you expressions in conversational opening also serve as an attention-getting device, as in the following:

(5) Context: *In a literature conference a female presenter begins*:
"Thank you for coming. Today, I'll present ..."

At the beginning of the "Johnny Carson Show", his repetition of "thank you" also functions to draw attention from the audience. In using thank you expressions as conversational openings, the speaker informs the hearers that he/she is ready to start conversation. It may also be a mark of politeness in a formal situation, acting as part of a greeting.

Thank you expressions serve an important role in situational change or topic transition. Consider:

(6) Context: *In the news program, "Today" on NBC, one announcer moves to another.*
Bryan: Let's swing it on over to News Desk by Margaret.
Margaret: Thanks, Bryan. In the news this morning, long and curious presidential campaign 1992...

In the above example, Margaret's thanks expression acts as a bridge between an old situation and a new situation (discussion situation to news-announcing situation) or between an old topic and a new topic. Sometimes the topic introduced in this way is not connected with the old one, but the device serves as a lubricant and as the speaker's pretence that conversation is an orderly, cooperative endeavor, and that she smoothly turns to the new topic.

On occasion, thank you expressions are used to stop an ongoing conversation. This is shown in a hurried situation.

(7) Context: *Two classmates are talking to each other in the library. One of the two is going to go to class.*
Jane: Oh my, I forgot to bring your material. I left it at home. I'll bring it tomorrow, or let me see...
Jim: Thanks, Jane. Please bring it tomorrow. I've gotta go to class. See you.

Jim uses this strategy to warn Jane that he is busy, or that he has only a moment to spare, or that he must leave shortly, or some other limitation. "At a convenient point, use this kind of information to bring the conversation to an end." (Wardhaugh:1985). In the above situation, if Jane intends to continue the conversation, Jim's next strategy would be to use an apology expression rather than the thanks expression: "Excuse me, I've gotta go to class..." The thank you strategy may be less direct and less explicit than the apology strategy. The use of thank you expression in the above example may be an effort to minimize the "face threatening", in Brown and Levinson's (1987) term.

Thank you expressions in conversational closing are used in similar situations to those in conversational opening: e.g. "Thank you, America" at the end of a president's formal address, "Thank you for joining us." at the end of a news program or special lecture, "Thank you for being with us" in an interview situation, etc. This is an ending signal that the speaker is going to close the conversation.

My data show that thank you expressions in conversational opening and closing are more frequently used in one-to-many

relationships, whereas those in conversational stopping or change are more frequently used in one-to-one relationships. It is very important to note that the thank you expressions which function to open, stop, and close a conversation already involve the basic use of appreciating benefit. In other words, the two functions are interrelated, the former being based on the latter.

3. Function of leave-taking and positive answer: Thank you expressions sometimes serve to substitute for leave-taking expressions, although the two types often co-occur. In my data, this function is notably found in business situations such as in liquor stores and supermarkets where the interaction between a cashier and a customer is pervasive:

(8) Context: *When a customer is about to leave in a liquor store:*
Customer: Good night!
Cashier: Thanks.

The thank you expression by the cashier is not only a token of gratitude for using his liquor store, but also a token of leave-taking. The cashier says "Good night" to many customers so often that he might want to vary his leave-taking pattern. Of course, there are variations in the customer's strategy: "Thanks. Have a nice evening!" (gratitude expression + leave-taking) or simply the same response, "Good night!" (only leave-taking). In (8), the thank you expression has the functions of leave-taking in addition to gratitude. This use of the thank you expression is observable only in leave-taking situation: only when the customer is about to leave

after the payment interaction done.

Thank you expressions are also used to answer positively to an offer. Observe:

(9) Context: *John treated Jennifer to a cup of coffee in his apartment. He found her cup empty.*
John: Do you want some more coffee?
Jennifer: Thank you.

Here the coffee had not been served yet. The thank you expression by Jennifer indeed sets up a complex connotation: "Yes, please give me some more coffee" (positive answer + politeness form + request). It is worthwhile to note that the expressions functioning as leave-taking and answer also include the basic use of appreciating a benefit.

4. Function of emotional dissatisfaction or discomfort: Thank you expressions may be used to indirectly express dissatisfaction with the interlocutor's attitude.

(10) Context: *In a group discussion in class, some students are talking about a writing process.*
John: ... I think it's important to well develop the thesis statement. Actually, I am doing that in my writing. (jokingly) How excellent I am...
Lori: (Interrupting John) Thank you, John...

In the above, Lori is not thankful for John's idea about the writing process but indirectly asks him to shut off his boasting. It can also be used to be somewhat sarcastic. As Apte (1974) notes, the intonation of the phrase is very important in such settings, especially since it conveys a completely different message from the

literal one. In (10), there is stress on "thank", and it has usually got an elongated vowel. In addition, the production of "John" tends to be lengthened. It is very important to notice that this use of thank you expression is not tied to the basic function of appreciating a benefit. I assume that this function may be more observable in a familiar relationship than in an unfamiliar relationship, though my data is not sufficient to support this.

THE RESPONSES TO THANK YOU EXPRESSIONS

In the speech act of thanking, it will be very effective if the benefactor accepts or acknowledges the gratitude. The thanker expects the benefactor to respond to his/her politeness. There can be various strategies of responding to thank you expressions. I classify them into the following types.

Type 1. **Acceptance** : *You're (very) welcome, Sure, O.K., My pleasure, Mhmm.*
Type 2. **Denial** : *No problem, Not at all, Don't mention it.*
Type 3. **Reciprocity**: *Thank you*
Type 4. **Comments**: *Detailed description*
Type 5. **Non-verbal gestures**: *a smile, a nod, etc.*
Type 6. **No response**

Following this categorization, I will explain how the various types are chosen, and what determines the choice of response.

Type 1. Acceptance: A large number of responses belong to this type: "You're welcome" (154 responses;42%); "Mhmm" (79;22%); "Sure" (11;3%); "My pleasure" (4;1%). It is clear that "You're welcome" is the most frequent. This response is shown to be used regardless of

the relationship of the interlocutors. This is in keeping with the rationale that the implicit ideal in American English may be to accept gratitude "graciously" as shown in the act of compliments (Pomerantz:1978). Consider an example, particularly with the intensifier, "very." :

(11) Context: *On the way to a theatre, Jimmy found Tom dropped his wallet.*
Jimmy: Hey, Tom, you dropped your wallet.
Tom: Oh, thank you very much.
Jimmy: You're very welcome.

The use of "very" in the response is followed by the use of the same intensifier in the gratitude expression. The exchange of the intensifiers may greatly reduce "face threatening", since however conventional the thank you expression is, the exchange of the intensifiers implicitly predicts that both interlocutors want to express their sincerity and that their sincerity functions to enhance the harmonious atmosphere to some degree.

The next most frequent response in this category is "Mhmm". This is a non-verbal sound which signals the accpetance of the gratitude. Let's consider an interesting example:

(12) Context: *After a student checks out a book in the library.*
Student: Thanks.
Librarian: You're welcome.
(In three or four minutes, the student brings some other books and checks them out from the same librarian.)
Student: Thanks.
Librarian: Mhmm.

The example above shows changes of strategy in the speech act. The librarian seems to avoid the same strategy of response to the same

thank you expression from the same student. A responder may use a different strategy to the same thanker in a repetitive service situation to give a variety.

The responses, "Sure" and "My pleasure", are the least frequent. Consider:

(13) Context: *Louis, who was depressed, wanted to talk to his friend, Mike, who had nothing particular to do on the weekend. Louis treated him to some beer, and while drinking and talking, they had a good time.*
Louis: Oh, I'm much better. Thank you for talking to me.
Mike: My pleasure. My pleasure.

It is a truth that Louis gets much benefit from Mike. But it is not deniable that benefactor, Mike, also gets some benefit from Louis, because he was well treated by Louis when he had nothing particular to do. The repetition of "My pleasure" implies that it is more than acceptance of gratitude; enough gratitude has been displayed, and thus the thanker is recognized as a polite person.

Type 2. Denial: The responder in this category may humble himself or herself by denying that he/she favored the beneficiary. In my data, there are only a few occurrences of such responses (total 4.2%): "No problem" (15 response;4%), "Not at all" (1 responses;0.2%), and no occurrence of "Don't mention it". Thus, my data does not show whether such factors as sex and the relationship of the interlocutors influence the choice of the response.

(14) Context: *Borrowing situation. Girlfriend and boyfriend were cooking.* *(from Soap opera)*

Girlfriend: We ran out of salt and sugar. I'm gonna go to the supermarket. Can I use your car?
Boyfriend: Sure.
Girlfriend: Thanks, Tim.
Boyfriend: No problem.

The inclusion of the negatives "no" or "not" may, in a sense, adds a more polite effect to the benefactor's help and strengthen the relationship between the interlocutors.

Type 3. Reciprocity: By reciprocity it is meant that a gratitude expression, "thank you", is responded to by another "thank you". This results when both interlocutors share and exchange the benefit. More specifically, it takes place when both interlocutors believe that the past acts benefited them and thus they feel grateful for the past acts. This pattern, totaling 47 responses (13%), is observable, particularly in the business situation, where a worker and a customer interact.

(15) a. Context: *In Target, a department store.*
Cashier: Here's your receipt. Thanks.
Customer: Thanks.
b. Context: *In the barber shop*
Barber: Thank you.
Customer: Thanks.

The gratitude expression by the cashier implies "Thank you for using our shop", while that by the customer implies "Thank you for the service." Since both interlocutors reciprocally benefited, they express appreciation for each other rather than simply accepting gratitude from the other party. This may be viewed as a cooperative activity. Reciprocity type is also observable in one-to-one

interview situations on T.V. For example, when an announcer said at the end of interview, "Thank you for being with us, Dr. Hunt.", the interviewee also responded, "Thank you" to imply that he/she appreciated the invitation. As mentioned earlier, it is a necessary condition for this response that the actions are believed to be good for both interlocutors.

Type 4. Comments: Comments are a detailed description or account of the event appreciated or previous expression of gratitude. In my data, 31 responses (9%) of this type have been elicited. Comments can be either acceptance, as in (16) or denial, as in (17):

(16) Context: *After a party between friends.*
Guest: It was a wonderful party. Thank you very much.
Hostess: I'm glad you could come.
(17) Context: *A professor advised a student who had a hard problem to solve.*
Student: (Gladly) Thank you very much for the advice. I really appreciate it.
Professor: Well, that's why we're here.

In (16), the hostess implicitly accepts the gratitude by expressing gladness in detail, whereas in (17) what the professor said implies that one does not necessarily have to say "thank you" in this situation and that he is responsible for giving some advice. Comments of this kind reinforce the politeness.

Type 5. Non-verbal gestures: Non-verbal gestures and facial expressions such as a smile and a nod can be considered a device of a response to thank you expressions. In this type, conversational

continuity[3] is an important factor to consider. It is usually the case that if a thanker continues talking, the opposite party is hindered from responding to the thank you. This is seen in the form of thank you plus additional accounts, as in the following:

(18) a. Context: *Tom and Jim share a room. Tom cleaned up their room alone when Jim was not there. Jim comes back.*
Tom: I just cleaned up the room.
Jim: Oh, thank you. It's clean...(keep talking)
Tom: (While Jim is talking) Nodding.

b. Context: *John returns a book that he borrowed from Steve.*
John: Thank you. It was interesting and helpful... (keep talking)
Steve: (While John is talking) Smiles.

The thankers continue talking, adding some more specific statements: "It's clean..." in (a) and "It was interesting and helpful..." in (b). These additional statements serve to give the thank you expression a more sincere effect. The responders do not interrupt the thankers in order to give a vocal response, and instead they give a smile or a nod, while listening. They may think that listening is more polite than interrupting to give a response. This seems to make sense since thanking and its response are used to reinforce politeness and rapport between the interlocutors.

Type 6. No-response[4]: This type is particularly noteworthy, considering that a thanker is usually expected to get a sign of accepting the gratitude. In this sense, it is worthwhile to observe the situations where no response is elicited. The no-response type

is largely dependent on what the responder's emotional state is. In my data, in a situation where someone is hurrying or worrying, no response was elicited:

(19) a. Context: *After paying at a gas station.*
Cashier: Thank you.
Customer: No response (he has gone.)
b. Context: *The police go to a suspect's house to ask some questions of his wife. (From Soap Opera)*
Police: What time did Mr. Thompson come back on the night of the murder?
Mrs. Thompson: I'm not sure, maybe, around 12 o'clock.
Police: (Opening the door to leave) Thank you.
Mrs. Thompson: (With a worried face) No response.

In order for conversation to work, both participants should be interested in the topic and emotionally ready to talk. Likewise, in the gratitude pattern, if a responder is in a negative emotional state, he/she may not respond to a thank you expression. As in the above examples, emotional pressure may not allow the responders to participate in the conversation.

Note that no response is also elicited between strangers. In the case of no-response situation where a stranger opens a door for a walking stranger behind, he/she may be in a hurry situation, or he/she may think that a favor of this kind is ritual. However, this assumption might not be valid considering Herbert's (1986:82) point that acceptance, especially appreciation token should be most common among strangers. What seems more important in my corpus is that most persons who open doors whom I have observed are usually in a hurry to be on their own way. Particularly, one does not speak to 'busy' strangers (Wardhaugh, 1985). In other words, they are not

ready to participate in the conversation[5].

In addition, the no-response type occurs in ritualized greetings and compliments:

(20) a. Context: *Greeting between friends on the street.*
John: How are you doin'?
Betty: Fine, how about you?
John: Fine, thanks.
Betty: No response (She has gone).
b. Context: *Joe shows Mary a car he recently bought.*
Mary: It's very nice car.
Joe: Thank you.
Mary: No response.

In my data, thank you expressions for ritualized greetings such as "How are you?", "Good luck!", "Enjoy your dinner!", get-well greetings (e.g. "I hope you will get better soon."), etc. do not receive a response. Interestingly, thank you expressions right after leave-taking do not receive a response:

(21) Context: *In a restaurant*
Cashier: Here's your change and receipt. Have a nice evening.
Customer: Thank you.
Cashier: No response.

The cashier does not give a response probably because he may consider the thanking which the customer expressed as a leave-taking and thus he thought that his ritualized leave-taking was already done.

The last category which does not receive a response is the thank you expression used in conversational opening, stopping, and closing, mentioned in a previous section. This is often seen in formal situations such as formal addresses, conferences, etc. This

shows that a thank you expression in a one-to-many relationship usually does not receive a response. This is further demonstrated in the interview situation on T.V. In one-to-one interviews, the interviewee gave reciprocal thanks, whereas in one-to-many interviews, the interviewees did not give a response.

Unlike the responses of non-verbal gestures connected with conversational continuity, which is thanker-oriented, the no-response in the hurrying situation, worry situation, or ritualized behavior such as compliments and greetings is responder-oriented.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have analyzed thank you expression and responses to it in American English. As I pointed out earlier, these acts have the effect of enhancing rapport between the interlocutors. I have claimed that thank you expressions are basically used to express appreciation of benefits and that this basic use of appreciating benefits is extended to the functions of conversational opening, stopping, closing and to the functions of leave-takings and positive answers, but not to the function of emotional dissatisfaction or discomfort. In other words, the functions of conversational opening, stopping, closing and the functions of leave-takings and positive answers underlyingly involve the appreciation of benefit, but the function of emotional dissatisfaction does not. This shows that the same forms can have different implications in different contexts.

I also showed the response patterns. The frequency of their

occurrences is shown in the following:

	The number of responses	Percentage
You're welcome	154	(42%)
Mhmm	79	(22%)
Reciprocal Thank-you	47	(13%)
Comments Type	31	(9%)
No-response	16	(4%)
No problem	15	(4%)
Sure	11	(3%)
Non-verbal gestures	6	(2%)
My pleasure	4	(1%)
Not at all	1	(0.2%)

In my research, it was difficult to draw a generalization about the influence of the relationship of the interlocutors, their genders, their social status, etc. on their choice of responses to thank you expressions. There seems to be no absolute rule to govern this speech act. That is why illocutionary acts would be conventional but not rule governed at all. (Searle, 1969:71). For further research, it is worth focusing on the influence of those factors. In addition, it will be interesting to observe how this type of speech act is used in other languages.

The speech acts of thank you expressions and responses to them seem to conflict with Grice's (1975) conversational maxim, "Be truthful", as do the acts of compliment (Holmes:1986) in the sense that we are expected to tolerate some degrees of exaggeration or overuse of those speech acts. In further research, it would be also worthwhile to further examine those speech acts in connection with Gricean maxims.

NOTES

1. In further research, it would be interesting to investigate how different these conventions can be from culture to culture.

2. In this paper, the examples for which I do not give the sources come from actual use in daily interaction. In collecting data, I have made a note whenever I catched the responses to thank you.

3. This term is not used technically. This term means that a speaker is interested in talking to the addressee and thus he/she wants to continue talking. The topic he/she is going to talk about can be either the same as or different from the preceding topic.

4. In this section, the use of "No response" does not mean that the responses are absolutely and always dumb. They could say something which has nothing to do with "Thank you." What I am observing here is whether they respond to "Thank you."

5. There might be some age or gender differences here.

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